
Government of the District of Columbia



Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of
Roque R. Gerald, Psy.D.
Acting Director/Director Nominee

“Confirmation Hearing”

Committee on Human Services
Tommy Wells, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

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Good morning, Chairmen Wells and members of the Committee on Human Services. I'm Roque Gerald, acting director of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). I come before you today as Mayor Fenty's nominee for permanent director of CFSA.

Serving Children and Families: A Personal Perspective

Over 30 years ago, I got my first job at For Love of Children (FLOC), which was starting a Wilderness School for trouble youth from the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Fresh out of college, I became a counselor in charge of 10 boys, ages 13 to 17, who dubbed me "Chief Roc." All of us, urban born and bred, set about building log cabins in the woods and doing community service projects in several states for months at a time. This work was definitely challenging but also rewarding, 60 to 70 percent of those youth succeeded in turning their lives around.

That experience became the inspiration for my devotion to a career of serving young people and their families. Today, seeking confirmation as permanent director of CFSA is an opportunity to demonstrate my lifelong commitment to keeping children and youth safe and helping them grow. This is the chance of a lifetime to continue building on the many innovations that are completing CFSA's transformation on behalf of the District's most vulnerable children. It presents the challenge of turning the vision of consistently strong performance and accountability into reality. It offers the potential reward of improving outcomes, not just processes, for children and families on a large scale. It opens the way to play a broad role in inspiring a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration among the child-serving community to better protect children; to help them achieve safe, permanent homes; and to ensure lasting positive change in their lives.

In the 1970s, I became a child welfare investigator at the county level in Virginia. In those days, we not only investigated reports of abuse or neglect but also worked the cases. The county where I was employed implemented family therapy practices based on the work of icons in the field like Salvatore Minuchin, Marianne Walters and Braulio Montalvo. Through these cutting-edge techniques, I learned effective ways of helping families in crisis and gained a deep respect for innovation as the basis for improving outcomes.

After earning a doctorate in clinical psychology, I assisted in opening the first residential facility on the east coast for juvenile sex offenders. Later, I entered private practice, specializing in pediatric psychology. Many of my clients were referred from the child welfare system. I gained extensive experience in helping deeply troubled young people who had suffered abuse and neglect.

In the mid-1990s, I returned to FLOC as director of clinical services. This was the era when the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives were starting up in the District. From working with individuals and families, I stepped up to developing clinical practices in organizations, particularly Columbia Heights-Shaw. We instituted a practice model for assisting families based on innovative work underway in New Zealand, England, and the west coast. This helped me to forge a broader vision of child and family well being. I recognized the importance of teaming with families to build on their strengths. I also saw the value of strong neighborhood-based support to struggling families.

In 2001, I joined the newly formed Child and Family Services Agency to establish the Office of Clinical Practice. The office forged an innovative approach to supporting child and family well being within a public child welfare agency. As director, I led a talented staff in instituting the practice of Family Team Meetings. My team and I also collaborated with a series of agencies to improve medical, mental health, and educational services for children and youth in care. This work expanded my perspective, as I saw firsthand the critical role community-wide systems must play to help vulnerable children, youth, and families. This awareness prepared me for a broader role in leading CFSA's transformation.

CFSA Today

Ten months ago, I stepped in as interim director of CFSA during the most difficult time in the agency's history. In our first six years, CFSA showed steady improvement against numerous benchmarks of good child welfare performance. We moved ahead in strengthening the safety net for District children and families. Then, responding to the crisis of 2008 temporarily forestalled our progress.

The first task I faced 10 months ago was working through a backlog of nearly 1,800 investigations started but not completed within the required 30 days. Through an agency-wide mobilization over the next five months, we safely closed every investigation in the backlog before the end of the year. During that same period, CFSA undertook a series of additional tasks to demonstrate that the crisis had only detoured—but not derailed—the course of local child welfare reform. Again, agency-wide mobilization and focus on a discrete set of goals resulted in accomplishment of all those tasks by the end of the year.

Today, there's an untold story of renewed energy, focus, and progress within CFSA. Performance in many areas is higher than ever and moving steadily toward fully realizing the vision of the strongest possible safety net for District children, youth, and families. Here's what that vision looks like to me.

Vision for CFSA

First, **the primary focus of child welfare must be on achieving positive outcomes for the children and families we serve.** The emphasis here is on outcomes, as opposed to process, signaling a major shift in both thinking and action. For years, we have been mired in implementing and tracking performance on hundreds of process steps. The theory is that high performance on process will add up to improved outcomes. But that isn't necessarily true. For example, social workers are making a high rate of regular visits. That's good but not enough. The outcome measure is: Are those visits making children safer, families stronger, and leading to permanence for more children and youth more quickly? Are we just making visits—or using those contacts to make a difference in people's lives?

I have a draft set of goals that I believe deserve our full attention because they speak to improved outcomes for children and families. For example:

- A safety outcome is more families with in-home cases safely maintaining their children at home without entry into foster care.
- A permanence outcome is more children and youth leaving the system for reunification, guardianship, or adoption and fewer youth aging out.

- A well being outcome is more foster children and youth having no more than one placement change regardless of their length of stay in care.

CFSA and our providers should be targeting, and held accountable for achieving, outcomes like these at least up to the level of national standards.

Second, **the way to achieve good outcomes is to focus on the basics.** In child welfare, the basics begin with strong, shared values as the foundation for improving the safety, permanence, and well being of those we serve. In social work, the basics mean core principles such as respect, urgency, intervention, and teamwork. Throughout the system, the basic standard must be good performance that demonstrates quantity, quality, timeliness, and effectiveness in equal measure. In public serve, the basics include a high level of accountability. CFSA has sound practice models that articulate many of these basics. We must go deeper to act on them consistently in our daily work.

Third, **CFSA must innovate while remaining accountable.** Being able to try, evaluate, modify, discard, or replace strategies as needed to increase effectiveness is a critical prerequisite to achieving positive outcomes. This is a lesson reinforced during our swift and safe elimination of the backlog last year. CFSA has never lacked for ideas. We can do better on setting priorities, committing to initiatives, and following through to completion.

And finally, **the local child-serving community at large must work collaboratively to achieve a full and lasting transformation of child welfare.** Private providers manage about half of the District's child welfare caseload. Their individual capabilities and collective partnership with CFSA are critical to achieving good outcomes for children and families. Last fall, CFSA took a major step in co-locating in-home staff with the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives. We're now working together to serve families at home, which is improving our long-standing partnership. As the Inspector General's recent report on the Jacks case showed, much remains to be done around collaboration of public and private agencies all serving the same children and families.

Conclusion

In closing, I commit to leading CFSA in doing our full share to forge the strongest possible safety net for children and families in the District. At the same time, CFSA can't do it alone. I touched briefly today on just a few of the many organizations that make up safety net. All have important roles to play. Support from the Fenty administration has been strong and will continue to be essential. I hope we can continue to count on the support you Chairperson Wells, this committee and the Council. Community-wide involvement is also vital. If we're a city that truly cares about children, people will look out for troubled families. More people will step forward as foster or adoptive parents. More people will mentor our youth in foster care or offer job opportunities for them.

In addition to strengthening the safety net, I have a deep hope. It is simply to see child welfare defined by our achievement in protecting thousands of children every day, not just by the terrible, infrequent tragedies.

In my office, I keep a photograph from nearly 40 years ago of myself with the boys from the FLOC Wilderness School. It serves as a treasured reminder of how I started the journey of serving children, youth, and families. My continuing relationships with some of those boys, now grown men, are an enduring source of personal inspiration. Today, I hope to gain the opportunity to serve as a strong and effective "Chief Roc" for over 4,000 children and youth in the District child welfare system. I look forward to collaborating with others to continue to improve outcomes for those among us who urgently need our help.